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A study evaluated the assertion that basal reading programs limit or control teachers' instructional decision making through a process referred to as "deskilling" by surveying elementary educators regarding their use of and opinions about basal reading programs. Responses from 553 of 1,000 randomly sampled International Reading Association members on descriptive, Likert, and open-ended items revealed little, if any, evidence of teacher deskilling. Rather, results indicated that most teachers: (1) are discriminating consumers in charge of their curricular and instructional decision making; (2) view basal reading programs as one instructional tool available to them as they plan literacy lessons; and (3) do not relinquish control to basal materials or any presumed power behind the materials. Furthermore, rather than deskilling teachers, basal materials empower teachers by providing them instructional suggestions to draw from, adapt, or extend as they craft lessons for their students. (Contains 35 references and 3 tables of data.) (Author/RS)

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READING RESEARCH REPORT NO. 26
*Fall 1994*



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READING RESEARCH REPORT NO. 26
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The National Reading Research Center (NRRC) is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research on reading and reading instruction. The NRRC is operated by a consortium of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland College Park in collaboration with researchers at several institutions nationwide.

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For more information about the NRRC's research projects and other activities, or to have your name added to the mailing list, please contact:

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National Reading Research Center
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# Do Basal Readers Deskill Teachers?

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**Abstract.** *Several researchers and writers have hypothesized that basal reading programs limit or control teachers' instructional decision making through a process referred to as* deskilling *(Apple, 1982; Shannon, 1987). This study evaluated this assertion by surveying elementary educators regarding their use of and opinions about basal reading programs. Responses from 553 of 1,000 randomly sampled International Reading Association members on descriptive, Likert, and open-ended items revealed little, if any, evidence of teacher deskilling. Rather, results indicated that most teachers (a) are discriminating consumers in charge of their curricular and instructional decision making, (b) view basal reading programs as one instructional tool available to them as they plan literacy lessons, and (c) did not relinquish control to basal materials or any presumed power behind the materials. Furthermore, it is argued from survey results and prior research that rather than deskilling teachers, basal materials* empower *teachers by providing them instructional suggestions to draw from, adapt, or extend as they craft lessons for their students.*

The basal reading programs used by teachers in the majority of U.S. elementary classrooms to instruct children in reading and language arts skills have been examined critically both in the historical (Smith, 1934/1985) and contemporary literatures (e.g., Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, & Murphy, 1988; Hoffman & Roser, 1987; Shannon, 1989; Shannon & Goodman, 1994). Criticisms have involved various aspects of basal programs, including gender stereotypes in the literature in basals (e.g., Frasher & Walker, 1972; Graebner, 1972; Stefflre, 1969), racial and ethnic bias in basal selections (e.g., Baxter, 1974; Britton, 1975; O'Donnell, 1974), and the paucity of instruction in the basal teacher guides (Durkin, 1981). Critics of basal programs have included whole language researchers and theorists (e.g., Goodman, 1988; Harste, 1989), teachers (e.g., Goodman, 1989, Peterson, 1989), and critical theorists (Shannon, 1989), as well as educational watchdog groups (e.g., the Council for Basic Education, see Tyson-Bernstein, 1988) and professional organizations (National Council of Teachers of English, 1988).

One of the most persistent, recent criticisms of basal reading programs is that such materials control or limit teachers' freedom through a process referred to as *deskilling* (Apple, 1982, 1986; Goodman et al., 1988; Shannon, 1989, 1990; Shannon & Goodman,

1994). According to the deskilling argument, by using basal reading programs, teachers surrender control or responsibility for curricular and instructional decisions in reading to the materials, thus abrogating their previously learned and acquired teaching skills.

Apple (1986) likened educational deskilling to that which persons like Braverman (1974) argued occurred historically with workers in industry:

> The skills employees have developed over many years on the job are broken down into atomistic units, redefined, and then appropriated by management to enhance both efficiency and control of the labor process. In the process, workers' control over timing, over defining appropriate ways to do a task, and over criteria that establish acceptable performance are all slowly taken on as the prerogatives of management personnel who are usually divorced from the actual place in which the work is carried out. Deskilling, then, often leads to the atrophy of valuable skills that workers possessed, since there is not longer any "need" for them in the redefined labor process. (Apple, 1986, p. 209)

Apple (1982) maintained that a similar process occurs in education when teachers use textbooks and other instructional materials to teach science, social studies, mathematics, and reading:

> Skills that teachers used to need, that were deemed essential to the craft of working with children—such as curriculum deliberation and planning, designing teaching and curricular strategies for specific groups and individuals based on intimate knowledge of these people—are no longer as necessary. With the large-scale influx of prepackaged material, planning is separated from execution. The planning is done at the level of the production of both the rules for use of the material and the material itself. The execution is carried out by the teacher. In the process, what were previously considered valuable skills slowly atrophy because they are less often required. (p. 146)

This notion of deskilling has been applied directly to basal reading materials (Goodman et al., 1988; Shannon, 1989, 1990; Shannon & Goodman, 1994), the argument being that through the use of commercial reading materials, teachers relinquish control of or responsibility for their teaching. For example, Shannon (1987) stated that "the technical control of reading programs (the commercial reading materials) deskills teachers by supplying the goals, means, and evaluation of their reading instruction" (p. 321). He also asserted that deskilling is the result of the use of basal readers: "The rise of the reading expert and publishers through the requirement of guidebook-directed instruction deskilled teachers in terms of their ability to offer thoughtful reading instruction independently" (Shannon, 1989, p. 81). According to Shannon (1989), the consequences of deskilling are as follows:

> Virtually no one, including the teacher, is offered a literacy which asks readers to go beyond the word and literal trans-

> lation of text to tackle the sense, feeling, truth, and intention of an author through the words he or she used in a text. Moreover, no one is asked to develop his or her ability to express understanding of a text—what it does and might mean in one's life. In short, no one is asked to be truly literate by any criterion beyond a standardized test. (Shannon, 1989, p. 111)

Recent investigations and analyses, however, challenge these notions and instead suggest that teachers use textbook guides and materials in a much more discriminating manner than the deskilling literature would suggest. For example, data from observational studies by Barr and Sadow (1989), Hoffman et al. (1994), and Sosniak and Stodolsky (1993) indicate that basal reading materials were used thoughtfully and judiciously by elementary classroom teachers, who selected some instructional suggestions for use, adapted others, and ignored still others. Additionally, these empirical findings have been replicated with respect to instruction in content subjects (e.g., Freeman & Porter, 1989; Stodolsky, 1989; Thornton, 1991).

Baumann (1992) examined the research and writing on deskilling and argued that the empirical evidence for it was not great in volume, compelling, or generalizable. While not denying the historical and contemporary limitations of any commercially produced reading instructional materials, Baumann challenged the basal critics' suggestion "that there is a simple cause and effect relationship between the materials of literacy instruction, basal readers specifically, and teachers' freedom, or lack thereof, to direct literacy lessons . . . . Basal materials do not teach, any more than the trade books or maps and globes do; teachers teach, not the instructional tools" (1992, p. 397).

Baumann (1992) suggested the need for future research on the impact basal reading materials have on elementary teachers' reading instruction, hinting that a survey would be illuminating: "It would be interesting to find out how teachers would respond were they asked directly if basal materials themselves teach students to read or if they were asked if basal programs restrict their freedom to make decisions about their classroom reading programs" (p. 393). The purpose of the research reported here is to follow up on this suggestion for a more direct assessment of the deskilling argument by surveying elementary educators about their use of and beliefs about basal readers.

## The Survey

To query educators about their use of basal reading programs, we prepared, field-tested, revised, and distributed a survey consisting of 26 substantive items of three types:

- **7 descriptive items**, which asked respondents about their current teaching position, academic training and experience in education, experience using basal reading materials, and knowledge of such materials. These items also asked about local textbook adoption procedures, teachers' freedom of choice regarding the use of basal or other instructional materials, and respondents' philosophical orientations toward reading instruction.

- **16 Likert-scale items**, which required respondents to rate items that described uses

of and beliefs about basals on a "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" scale. For example, those surveyed were asked to respond to statements like "I view the basal reader teacher edition as a source of teaching ideas rather than as a prescribed set of directions," and "Basal readers inhibit me from providing my students the kind of reading instruction I would like to provide them."

- **3 open-ended items**, which invited respondents to write separate answers to the following questions:

  1. What are your general thoughts about the advantages or disadvantages of using basal reading materials with elementary-age children?

  2. How does the basal reading program you use influence your reading instruction?

  3. Some writers have suggested that basal readers take away teachers' freedom to teach reading as they wish. This is referred to as *teacher deskilling*. By using basal programs, it is argued, teachers relinquish their ability to make instructional decisions. For example, the authors of the *Report Card on Basal Readers* expressed the following:

  > The view of the teacher incorporated by the basal is that of a scripted technician faithfully following the detailed lessons provided with the basal. The program itself does the teaching as long as the teacher does and says what the teachers' manual says to do. (pp. 102-103)

  What do you think about basal readers and teacher deskilling? Do you believe that you are deskilled by using basal reading materials? Please comment.

Surveys were distributed by mail using a list purchased from the International Reading Association, which has 94,000 members, 90% of whom are female and 10% are male, with an average age of 45. Sixty-six percent of IRA members are classroom teachers or reading teachers/specialists, 15% are administrators/supervisors, 12% are college faculty, and 6% are consultants or librarians. Seventy-seven percent of members have 11 or more years experience in education. The mailing list consisted of a computer-generated geographically stratified random sample (by zip code) of 1,000 IRA members in the U.S. who had identified elementary reading instruction as the focus of their professional responsibility. Six weeks following the distribution of the survey, a second survey was mailed to those who had not responded to the first mailing.

### Results and Discussion

A total of 563 surveys was returned, resulting in a 56.3% response rate, which was consistent geographically across the sample. For example, 57% of the surveys distributed within the 01-09 postal code region were returned. Of the surveys returned, 10 were excluded from data analysis because either the respondents failed to complete the survey, indicating that they did not have sufficient background to respond to the questions (5 surveys), or sur-

veys were returned after data analyses had commenced (5 surveys). Thus, results from 553 surveys were analyzed and are reported here according to the three item types.

***Descriptive items.*** Respondents were experienced elementary educators knowledgeable of basal materials. Ninety-four percent were current or former elementary classroom teachers, and 76% of the sample currently or previously had used basals when teaching reading. Only 8% indicated they presently teach but do not use basals at all. Fifty-three percent of respondents were classroom, reading, Chapter 1, or special education teachers; 32% were supervisors or administrators; and the remainder filled roles that included consultant (4%), librarian/media specialist (3%), college professor (2%), and other (6%). The sample included highly educated professionals (94% had masters degrees or higher), and they were quite experienced (87% had spent 11 or more years as educators). Ninety-eight percent indicated they were either very familiar (61%) or somewhat familiar (37%) with basals produced from 1980 to 1989, and 89% were very or somewhat familiar with basals produced from 1990 to 1993. In response to a query about basal reader selection processes in their local school districts, 71% indicated that adoption committees made such decisions, and 24% noted that basals were selected through all-teacher votes.

Following these demographic questions, an item asked respondents to select from a list of statements that presented ways in which basal materials could be or must be used in their schools or districts (this item allowed for multiple responses). Seventy-two percent indicated they were free to use alternatives to basal textbooks such as children's trade books; 36% indicated they were expected to use basals some of the time but that they were free to set them aside or supplement them with other materials such as trade books. Twenty-seven percent selected the statement "I am required to use basal reading materials, but I am given flexibility in how I use them," and 1% selected the statement "I am required to use basal reading materials, and I have little or no flexibility in how I may use them." Five percent indicated basals were not used at all in their schools or districts.

The item dealing with philosophical orientation (to which respondents also could select multiple answer choices) produced a mix of responses. Sixty-four percent indicated that students should acquire a set of basic reading skills or strategies, but only 6% labeled themselves as "traditionalists." Seventy-seven percent checked the statement "I have an 'eclectic' attitude toward reading instruction, which means that I would draw from multiple perspectives and sets of materials when teaching reading." Whereas 47% chose the response "basal reading programs are useful materials for teachers to draw from during reading instruction," 62% stated that they believed in a literature-based approach in which "trade books would be used *along with* basal reading materials." In contrast, 14% of the sample indicated that they were literature-based teachers who would not use basals at all. Sixty-six percent indicated that they believed in a whole language perspective in which they would "see it *appropriate* for whole language teachers to also use basal reading materials"; in comparison, 12% indicated they were whole language teachers who would not use basals at all.

In sum, the descriptive items indicate that the sample consisted of experienced classroom teachers who had used basal materials in their own teaching and were knowledgeable of current basal programs. School or district policy provided teachers considerable choice in whether basals were used or how they could be used. Philosophically, the majority characterized themselves as eclectics who believed that students need to acquire a set of basic reading skills or strategies in order to become fluent readers. The majority also referred to themselves as embracing literature-based and whole language perspectives, but that such orientations would not preclude the use of basal textbooks.

***Likert items***. Fourteen Likert items were constructed to evaluate respondents' inclination to be deskilled by basal materials. The item format involved a 5-point scale that included the choices Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree, which were scored 1 to 5 respectively. To control for possible item bias and response set by participants, items of two types were constructed: Type 1, in which an Agree or Strongly Agree response would indicate deskilling (e.g., "I use almost every reading skill lesson in the basal teacher edition"); and Type 2, in which a Disagree or Strongly Disagree response would indicate deskilling (e.g., "I select and choose teaching ideas from the basal manual that are appropriate for my students").

A factor analysis of the 14 Likert items revealed that 13 items clustered reliably on three subscales. After inspecting the items within each subscale for common characteristics, we labeled the subscales "Compliance Scale" (7 items, coefficient alpha = .797), "Flexibility/Benefit Scale" (4 items, alpha = .743), and "Individualization Scale" (2 items, alpha = .704). The single Likert item that did not load on these scales was excluded from further analysis. Table 1 contains these 13 Likert items by subscale.

The Compliance Scale included seven items that evaluated respondents' tendencies to follow or disregard the explicit or implicit structure in basal reading programs. Results showed that those surveyed tended to make instructional decisions independent of the structure or directives in the basal programs. For example, 91% responded Disagree or Strongly Disagree to the Type 1 item "I follow the suggestions in the basal teacher edition explicitly," and conversely, 97% responded Agree or Strongly Agree to the Type 2 item "I regularly supplement basal reader stories by having my students read trade books."

To permit mathematical calculations and to achieve consistency in interpretation, Type 2 items were recoded as Type 1 items (i.e., Type 2 items were scored 1 to 5 such that Strongly Disagree = 1 and Strongly Agree = 5). Therefore, the parenthetic item means, as well as the full scale mean (see Table 1), should be interpreted such that the higher the numerical value, the less evidence there is of deskilling. This resulted in a full scale mean of 4.37 for the Compliance Scale, indicating that the elementary educators' overall response to items which inquired whether they tended to defer decision making to basal materials was between Disagree and Strongly Disagree, a finding not supportive of the deskilling hypothesis.

The "Flexibility/Benefit Scale" included four items that assessed educators' feelings about the benefits of basal materials and whether they were used flexibly or rigidly. Two items inquired whether respondents used the

**Table 1.** Thirteen Likert Items Grouped According to Factor Analysis

| | SA/A | N | D/SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Compliance Scale ($\alpha$ = .797)** | | | |
| I follow the basal prereading activities exactly as presented in the teacher edition. (Type 1, $M$ = 4.25) | 2.8% | 15.6% | 81.7% |
| I often skip around in the student textbook, having my students read stories out of order. (Type 2, $M$ = 3.97) | 79.9% | 11.7% | 8.4% |
| I require my students to read all the stories in the basal student textbook. (Type 1, $M$ = 4.41) | 3.3% | 5.2% | 91.5% |
| I follow the suggestions in the basal teacher edition explicitly. (Type 1, $M$ = 4.44) | 2.0% | 7.4% | 90.6% |
| I regularly supplement basal reader stories by having my students read trade books. (Type 2, $M$ = 4.62) | 97.2% | 2.0% | 0.8% |
| I require my students to complete all the workbook pages. (Type 1, $M$ = 4.70) | 1.3% | 0.9% | 97.8% |
| I use almost every reading skill lesson in the basal teacher edition. (Type 1, $M$ = 4.18) | 7.7% | 8.7% | 83.5% |
| Full Scale: $M$ = 4.37 | | | |
| **Flexibility/Benefit Scale ($\alpha$ = .743)** | | | |
| | SA/A | N | D/SD |
| I view the basal reader teacher edition as a source of teaching ideas rather than as a prescribed set of directions. (Type 2, $M$ = 4.48) | 93.6% | 2.5% | 3.8% |
| Basal readers inhibit me from providing my students the kind of reading instruction I would like to provide them. (Type 1, $M$ = 3.36) | 27.2% | 15.8% | 57.1% |
| Basals help me to be an effective teacher of reading. (Type 2, $M$ = 3.0) | 38.3% | 29.3% | 32.4% |
| My students benefit by my use of a basal reading program. (Type 2, $M$ = 3.29) | 50.1% | 31.6% | 18.3% |
| Full Scale: $M$ = 3.54 | | | |
| **Individualization Scale ($\alpha$ = .704)** | | | |
| | SA/A | N | D/SD |
| I select and choose teaching ideas from the basal manual that are appropriate for my students. (Type 2, $M$ = 4.3) | 94.3% | 3.5% | 2.2% |
| I often modify activities in the basal reader teacher edition so that they better match my students' needs. (Type 2, $M$ = 4.44) | 95.6% | 3.5% | 1.0% |
| Full Scale $M$ = 4.37 | | | |

*Note.* SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree. Column values are percentages of responses falling into three clusters: Strongly Agree and Agree responses together, Neutral responses, and Disagree and Strongly Disagree responses together. To permit mathematical calculations and to achieve consistency in interpretation, Type 2 items were recorded as Type 1 items. Therefore, the parenthetic item means, as well as the full scale means, should be interpreted such that the ***higher*** the value, the ***less evidence*** of deskilling.

materials flexibly. Specifically, 94% of the respondents indicated that they agreed or agreed strongly that basal materials were a source of teaching ideas rather than a prescribed set of directions, and 57% disagreed or disagreed strongly that basal readers inhibited them from providing students appropriate reading instruction. The mean responses for these items (4.48 and 3.36 respectively) were consistent with those on the Compliance Scale and not supportive of the deskilling argument.

The other two items inquired about the benefits of basal materials to teachers and students. Specifically, 38% agreed or agreed strongly that basals helped them to be effective reading teachers (32% responded disagree or strongly disagree to this item; mean = 3.0), and 50% agreed or strongly agreed that students benefit by a teacher's use of a basal reading program (18% responded disagree or strongly disagree to this item; mean = 3.29). On the surface these latter two items might appear to support the deskilling hypothesis because respondents were equivocal about the benefits of basal use; however, their ambivalence suggests to us that they consider themselves—the teachers behind the curriculum and materials—to be the critical component in reading instruction, not the materials themselves, a stance that suggests they are not manipulated by the materials. In retrospect, it is our judgment that these two items assessed deskilling in a manner different from the other Type 2 items for which a Disagree or Strongly Disagree response indicated deskilling. Instead, we believe that these items focused on respondents' general attitudes and feelings toward basal materials, not on deskilling directly. In spite of these potential item limitations, the full scale mean of 3.54 for the Flexibility/Benefit Scale places overall responses in the Neutral to Disagree range with respect to the deskilling hypothesis.

The "Individualization Scale" included two items that evaluated the degree to which teachers selected or adapted basal instructional activities to accommodate students' individual needs. Results of these two items indicated that they used the materials selectively, with 94% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement "I select and choose teaching ideas from the basal manual that are appropriate for my students," and 96% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement "I often modify activities in the basal reader teacher edition so that they better match my students' needs." These responses, which resulted in a full scale mean of 4.37, indicate that those surveyed believed that it was their responsibility to use basal materials selectively and in a discriminating fashion, a result not supportive of the deskilling hypothesis.

To permit a comparison across time and with different groups of respondents regarding the deskilling issue, the remaining two Likert items were taken verbatim from Shannon's (1983, p. 74) study of basal use. Specifically, we selected two items from Shannon's group of five that evaluated his second hypothesis, "Teachers believe commercial materials can teach reading," which we interpreted as his deskilling hypothesis. The items, "Basal workbooks and worksheets are necessary reading instruction" and "The materials that make up the basal program are the most important part of my reading instruction," were selected because the teachers in Shannon's sample rated them the highest among the five. Using a Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1) scale, Shannon reported means of 4.42 and 3.79 respectively for these items for a sample

**Table 2.** Survey Responses to Two Likert Items Taken Verbatim from Shannon (1983)

| | SA/A | N | D/SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Basal workbooks and worksheets are necessary reading instruction. | 4.8% | 14.4% | 80.9% |
| The materials that make up the basal program are the most important part of my reading instruction. | 9.6% | 11.6% | 78.7% |

Shannon (1983) and Present Study Comparisons

| | |
|---|---|
| "Necessary reading instruction" | |
| Shannon, $N$ = 445 | $M$ = 4.42 |
| Present Study, $N$ = 543 | $M$ = 1.76 |
| "Most Important Part" | |
| Shannon, $N$ = 445 | $M$ = 3.79 |
| Present Study, $N$ = 541 | $M$ = 1.86 |

*Note.* 5 = Strong Agreement; 1 = Strong Disagreement. Therefore, for these item comparisons, the ***higher*** the value, the ***more evidence*** of deskilling.

of 445 teachers from one suburban midwestern school district. He interpreted this relatively high agreement with these items as support for his hypothesis that teachers believe the materials could teach reading.

In contrast, our sample of elementary educators expressed a markedly different response to these same items (see top portion of Table 2). Specifically, 81% disagreed or disagreed strongly that basal materials are necessary reading instruction, and 79% disagreed or disagreed strongly that the basal materials are the most important part of a teacher's reading instruction. For a direct comparison (Shannon did not report percentages of responses by category, just overall item means), we recoded our items numerically to match Shannon's, which means that, for these two items, the higher the value the more evidence of deskilling. Our item means of 1.76 and 1.86 were considerably different from those of Shannon (see bottom portion of Table 2), indicating that the elementary educators in our sample rejected Shannon's hypothesis that basal materials can teach (i.e., that basals deskill teachers). These dramatically different responses might indicate a sample-specific occurrence (i.e., teachers from a single school district vs. those from a representative sample of IRA members), or they might represent a then-versus-now phenomenon, that is, educators now being more independent in their use of basal materials than they were in the early 1980s.

In summary, respondents' ratings of the Likert items seriously challenge the argument that basal materials deskill teachers. Ratings on the Compliance and Individualization Scales clearly reject the deskilling hypothesis, and even the somewhat mixed results of the Flexibility/Benefit Scale still fail to support the assertion that basals promote teacher deskilling. The mean of all Likert items (excluding the two replicates from Shannon's study) is

4.1, which corresponds to the "Disagree" response with respect to the question "Do basals deskill teachers?" Finally, responses to the items from Shannon's (1983) study, which is often cited as evidence of teacher deskilling, fail to support the concept that teachers surrender skill to basal materials.

***Open-ended items.*** Written comments to the 3 open-ended items (see items 1–3 presented earlier) were analyzed by looking for responses to the final part of question 3, "Do you believe that you are deskilled by using basal reading materials?" Because those surveyed often answered this question in response to question 1 or 2, total written responses to questions 1–3 were examined in relation to this question. Following an initial reading of all written comments, six response categories were created: (a) "No," in which a respondent answered explicitly that she or he was not deskilled by basals; (b) "Inferred No," in which it was implied in a response that the person was not deskilled; (c) "Yes," in which a respondent answered explicitly that she or he was deskilled by basals; (d) "Inferred Yes," in which it was implied in a response that the person was deskilled; (e) "Conditional," in which a respondent indicated that there were certain conditions under which an individual might or might not be deskilled by basals; and (f) "Can't Tell," in which the response did not address the question. After these categories were established, the two researchers independently analyzed 100 randomly selected surveys, for which they agreed 90% of the time on the exact category of response. Discrepancies, which most often involved No-Inferred No or Yes-Inferred Yes distinctions, were resolved in conference.

Representative examples of the 510 total responses within the six categories are presented in Table 3. Thirty-three percent of the responses were categorized as "No." Some persons simply wrote "No" to the question asking if they were deskilled by basals while others did so more emphatically ("Poppycock!" wrote one respondent). Many, like the first two "No" samples in Table 3, provided an impassioned explanation for why they disagreed that basals deskill teachers.

Another 30% of the responses fell within the "Inferred No" category, in which respondents indirectly stated that they were not deskilled. Many of the responses in this category, such as the first "Inferred No" response in the table, referred to the decision making teachers engage in when using basals, emphasizing that teachers select what to teach and when to teach it, and disregard other instructional suggestions.

Twelve percent of the responses were categorized as "Yes," and another 6% were scored as "Inferred Yes." Although a few respondents answered the deskilling question in the first person, indicating that they themselves had been deskilled (see the first "Yes" response in Table 3), oftentimes the "Yes" and "Inferred Yes" responses were in the subjunctive (see the second "Yes" response) or referred to teachers as "they" (see the third and fourth "Yes" responses and the "Inferred Yes" response). In other words, when responding affirmatively to the deskilling question, many of those surveyed were agreeing that deskilling occurred, but it was something that happened to other educators, not themselves.

Twelve percent of the total responses to the open-ended items were categorized as "Condi-

**Table 3.** Representative Written responses to the question, "Do you believe you are deskilled by using basal reading materials?"

**SAMPLE "NO" RESPONSES** (32.9%)

- The basal has *NEVER* deskilled me. I am an educated professional given a different class of students each year. The basal is a guiding tool to use, but I, as the educator, make the decisions as to what part and how the basal is used to fit the needs of the current set of students entrusted to me. Any teacher that says the basal deskills them is insecure, needs more training, or is using the basal as a cop out!
- I do not think that the use of basal readers will deskill a teacher. This is a ridiculous statement and assumes that teachers do not have a mind of their own. No, I am not deskilled because I use basal readers.
- I disagree that basal readers cause "deskilling." Throwing out the basal is like throwing out the baby with the bath water. It is a resource and a guide. I would expect an experienced teacher to use what works with her/his students and omit what does not. It is the teacher's *use* or misuse that makes the difference.

**SAMPLE "INFERRED NO" RESPONSES** (30.4%)

- I choose from the teacher's editions what I wish to use and disregard the rest. One could never do everything a teacher's edition is filled with. I do have choices. What I do like is that the teacher's edition often gets my own creative juices flowing.
- I use it without manuals -- as I would a trade book and teach strategies and skills as needed.
- I agree that the scripting was overdone, but the Report [*Report Card on Basal Readers*] does a disservice to teachers by implying that they're all mindless dolts who read and say whatever is put in front of them. Programs don't teach kids, teachers do.

**SAMPLE "YES" RESPONSES** (12%)

- Yes, I believe that I was "deskilled" by my use of a basal. The basal program was seen as being responsible for teaching my children -- if I took each child through the pages and skill of the basal, they would learn to read -- if they didn't, then there was something "wrong" with the child, not with my teaching *or* the materials.
- Yes, I would feel "deskilled" if I had to rely on the basal.
- Yes I do think basals deskill teachers. Some teachers are very ill prepared to teach reading. They are totally dependent on the manual.
- I believe that the teachers in my building are "deskilled" by the basal. They are very much afraid of using their educational judgment to "skip" any of the program.

**SAMPLE "INFERRED YES" RESPONSE** (5.9%)

- It is possible for the teacher to use the basal as a "crutch" for too long a period and not to pursue professional growth in a variety of approaches to teaching reading effectively.

**SAMPLE "CONDITIONAL" RESPONSES** (12.0%)

- If a teacher gives up instructional freedom for the sake of efficiency, then deskilling probably takes place. If a teacher values creativity and has an innate love of reading, then he/she will deviate for the sake of doing what is instructionally sound and interesting for students.
- Basal readers only deskill a teacher when the teacher allows that to happen.
- This depends on the administrative policies in the district.

**SAMPLE "CAN'T TELL" RESPONSES** (6.9%)

- Frequently, the materials assist a novice teacher in planning sequentially.
- The basal program can be good for the teacher that lacks experience teaching reading because the teacher's guide will get them through.

*Note.* $N = 510$; Interrater agreement = 90% (based upon a 100-item random sample).

tional." These comments indicated that deskilling occurred under certain conditions, for example, only if and when a teacher allowed it to happen (see the first and second "Conditional" responses) or when administrative policies were such that they promoted deskilling (see the third "Conditional" response). The remaining 7% of responses were categorized as "Can't Tell" because those surveyed did not respond to the question in their written comments. A number of "Can't Tell" responses, like those in the table, suggested that basals were useful for inexperienced teachers.

In summary, when collapsing the six response categories into three more superordinate groups, results of the open-ended items revealed that 63% of the respondents indicated directly or indirectly that they were not deskilled by basal materials (i.e., all "No" and "Inferred No" responses); 18% indicated that they were deskilled (i.e., all "Yes" and "Inferred Yes" responses); and 19% responded in other ways (i.e., all "Conditional" and "Can't Tell" responses). Thus, overall responses to the open-ended items indicated that less than 1 in 5 persons surveyed agreed that basals deskilled themselves or other teachers, while a majority of those surveyed rejected the deskilling concept.

## Conclusions

Do basal readers deskill teachers? Our data lead us to a negative response. In fact, rather than supporting the hypothesis that basal materials deskill teachers, our findings suggest that most teachers are discriminating consumers who view basal readers as just one instructional tool available to them as they plan literacy lessons. This was made clear through the descriptive data (e.g., 77% considered themselves eclectics who drew from multiple methods and materials); from the Likert items (e.g., 94% viewed the basal manual as a source of teaching ideas rather than a prescribed set of directions); and within the open-ended items (e.g., respondents made comments such as "Judgment doesn't come in a basal", "I make the ultimate decisions, not the manual", "I'm not 'deskilled' -- I control the basal; it doesn't control me", and "Books don't teach reading; teachers teach reading!").

As with any research endeavor, this study has limitations. First, self-report data provide only one method for evaluating attitudes and behaviors and should be supplemented with or compared to other data sources (e.g., observations of teachers engaging in reading instruction). Second, the sample was restricted to members of one professional organization who are knowledgeable, experienced literacy educators. Whether similar results would be obtained from a different sample cannot be ascertained.

Nevertheless, we believe that our survey data provide powerful counter evidence to the argument that basal materials control teachers or usurp their decision-making skills. Although Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas (1993) reported that 8 teachers they interviewed depended heavily on basal reading materials, our survey findings are corroborated by three recent investigations (Barr & Sadow, 1989; Hoffman et al., 1994; Sosniak & Stodolsky, 1993) in which researchers *observed* teachers using basal reading materials.

Barr and Sadow (1989) used year-long observations and interviews to explore fourth-grade teachers' use of basal materials and

found that teachers differed considerably in the manner in which they relied on recommendations in the basal guides. For example, with respect to the selection and use of pre- and postreading suggestions in the teacher guides, Barr and Sadow observed that "Teachers do not mindlessly follow the suggestions in the guide; they actively select elements to enhance the reading experience" (p. 66).

Hoffman et al. (1994) used interviews, surveys, and observations to explore how first-grade teachers used basal materials. Their survey data revealed a pattern similar to our findings. For example, in response to a survey item that queried 269 teachers about their use of basal reading programs, 55% responded that they used basals but supplemented them a great deal with additional children's books; 10% indicated they used the basal but relied very little on the teacher manual; and 11% responded that they didn't use basals at all but used trade books instead. Only 12% of the teachers selected a response indicating they relied on basals a great deal and considered them the foundation of their reading instruction. With regard to their case study observations of 16 first-grade teachers, Hoffman et al. stated that "We observed little of the kind of homogeneity one would expect to find if teachers were blindly following the traditional basal programs currently adopted in their districts as a script or recipe for instructional practice" (p. 25). The researchers acknowledged that the influence of the basals was significant, but it did not control the teachers they observed. Rather than following the basal manuals in a steadfast way, most teachers "drew from the manuals only as needed and designed flexible routines around the pupil texts or other materials. Our data, then, challenge Shannon's (1983) hypothesis that the basals are 'deskilling' of teachers" (p. 25).

Sosniak and Stodolsky (1993) used interviews and observations to explore fourth-grade teachers' use of basal materials in reading, language arts, mathematics, and social studies. They reported considerable variation in the nature and degree of reliance on basal materials by the teachers they observed in their year-long investigation. The authors point out that even if teachers did rely on textbook materials, they did so reflectively and in ways that demonstrated "a curricular vision," describing one teacher's use of basal reading materials as supporting "her efforts at building a thoughtful and coherent instructional program" (p. 261). Sosniak and Stodolsky also provide evidence that teachers used textbook materials not as an instructional canon but rather as support tools: "Textbooks apparently were something akin to props these teachers used in putting on the play of fourth-grade education" (p. 266). Regarding the notion that basal materials deskill teachers, the authors saw little evidence of this in their data:

> At the very least, our findings should serve as a reminder that many of the current arguments calling for a change in textbooks and their use are likely to be insupportable. Textbook materials themselves cannot be assigned major responsibility for the variety of problems associated with elementary education. Textbooks do not control the elementary curriculum to the extent ordinarily assumed, and textbook content does not necessarily directly influence what students learn. Teachers are something other than instruc-

> tional managers coordinating and monitoring student progress through the materials. And, finally, teachers' use of textbook materials is not necessarily the unthoughtful, unskilled, or 'deskilled' (Shannon, 1987) behavior it is frequently portrayed to be. (p. 272)

Our survey data, supported and corroborated by the studies just described, present a very different picture of teachers' use of basal reading materials than the image put forth by those who argue such materials appropriate teachers' decision-making skills. Instead of being the subservient automatons, doing and saying what is put before them as the deskilling proponents describe, our research documents that teachers are informed, thoughtful, discriminating users of a variety of instructional materials from which they craft literacy lessons. In fact, rather than deskilling teachers, basal materials may actually *empower* teachers (Sosniak & Stodolsky, 1993) by providing them instructional suggestions to draw from, adapt, or extend, which was the case for many respondents in our sample.

For example, a number of teachers commented that basal teacher manuals provided them new techniques, reminded them of old favorites, or gave them opportunities to build on or modify the ideas in the teacher editions: "I have learned new techniques from the manuals, and I have used them as guides for my lessons." "Sometimes the manual gives me ideas that I may have forgotten!" "The teacher edition provides a wealth of ideas and activities to use, expand on, or adapt to suit my needs and those of my students and saves me the time of creating every experience for the children." Other teachers commented explicitly that the basal materials empowered them in their teaching and decision making: "Teachers will be empowered to be 'eclectic' in their use of [basal] materials and lesson planning." "Teachers are empowered to use the basals on an as-need basis." "There are many good ideas for teaching reading strategies in the Teacher Manual. A good teacher uses whatever is available to help a student learn to read. Teacher empowerment is important." Indeed, the most pervasive finding from our investigation is that it is *teachers* who are in charge of their own instruction, not some inanimate instructional material or some presumed power behind the materials (Shannon, 1993).

In conclusion, Goodman (1993) took exception with Baumann's (1992) critical analysis of the deskilling hypothesis, suggesting an empirical test of the issue:

> In the *Report Card* (Goodman et al., 1988) we chose to ask the question, "Why do teachers and students find themselves in a position of powerlessness during reading instruction?" We started there because we thought we knew the answer to the question Baumann wants to ask: "Do teachers and students find themselves in a position of powerlessness because of basal readers?" If that's his question I'd be happy to help him design a simple questionnaire study with one question. I'll even help him collect the data. In fact I'm going to encourage every teacher audience I address to answer Jim Baumann's question. (p. 86)

We do not know whether Goodman has posed his question to any audiences and, if so, what kind of response he has received. We do know,

however, that when a large, random sample of experienced, informed professional educators were presented with this question in several forms, a majority responded overwhelmingly and resoundingly "no."

**Author Note.** The first author of this paper was a coauthor of a basal reading series with copyrights of 1989, 1991, and 1993. He also drew from basal reading materials as a third- and fourth-grade teacher in the 1970s and again while returning to teach second-grade during the 1994-95 school year as part of a professional renewal program. The second author likewise selectively used basal reading materials in her 12-year career in public schools, during which she taught fifth grade and served as a reading specialist. No portion of this research was supported by any basal publisher, nor was any publisher involved in the conception, implementation, analysis, or interpretation of the survey reported here. A version of this paper was presented at the 43rd Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference in Charleston, South Carolina, in December 1993.

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